



*Original Contribution*

**SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF  
FOREIGN DOWNSHIFTERS IN SOUTHEASTERN BULGARIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of the current study is to outline some general social and economic characteristics of foreign downshifTERS in southeast Bulgaria. For the purpose of this research a questionnaire form was completed and 20 out of the 106 foreign respondents were defined as “downshifTERS” in accordance with certain criteria. The most often quoted reason for immigration was the social and economic factor (80 %) followed by appreciation of Bulgaria’s natural beauty (35 %). Leaving behind a highly industrialized, consumer-driven and stressful society, the new settlers had arrived in Bulgaria to find peace and tranquility, beautiful nature, well-preserved culture and traditions and lower property prices in rural areas where they can start a new life with their families. Characteristics of downshifTERS include a positive attitude, a higher level of environmental awareness and a desire to live a more sustainable and environmental-friendly life. Criticism towards Bulgarian society is on the basis of problems with pollution and garbage disposal (15%), animal treatment (20 %) and bureaucracy issues (20 %). A generally steady tendency reflects a positive attitude towards Bulgarian people (75 %), life in Bulgaria and personal satisfaction (90 %) and a willingness to make Bulgaria their permanent home (80 %).

**Key words:** immigrants, downshifTing problems, general tendencies

**INTRODUCTION**

In recent years a movement known as “downshifTing” has become increasingly popular in Europe and countries such as the United States and Australia. A closer look at dictionary entries reveals the following definitions for the term “downshifT”. According to the Cambridge online dictionary it means “to leave a job that is well paid and difficult in order to do something that gives you more time and satisfaction but less money” (1). Similar meanings can be found in the Oxford and Macmillan dictionaries where the verb “downshifT” is explained respectively as “to change a financially rewarding but stressful career or lifestyle for a less pressured and less highly paid but more fulfilling one” (2) and “to change to a different job or way of life, so that

you have less money and responsibility but more satisfaction and happiness” (3).

Other terms, such as „voluntary simplicity” and „simple living” have been in circulation, too.

In general, “voluntary simplicity” can be viewed as the kind of “lifestyle that minimizes consumption and the pursuit of wealth and material goods” and which individuals choose “in order to attain a simpler but more meaningful life. Voluntary simplicity is quite different from those who are forced to spend less and live a more simple life involuntarily, such as those who lose their job and cannot find work” (4). Similarly, other dictionary entries define it as “a philosophy or way of life that rejects materialism in favour of human and spiritual values, and is characterized by minimal consumption, environmental responsibility, and community cooperation” (5), and as a “lifestyle that is less pressured due to a focus away from accumulation of goods and more toward non-material aspects of life” (6).

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Likewise, “simple living” encompasses a number of different voluntary practices to simplify one's lifestyle. These may include “reducing one's expenditure and income, or increasing self-sufficiency. Like anti-consumerism, simple living can be a reaction to consumerism, materialism and conspicuous consumption” (7). Simple living may be characterized by individuals being satisfied with what they need rather than what they want, as well as a movement that is “distinct from those living in forced poverty, as it is a voluntary lifestyle choice” (8).

Thus, the above brief outlook of online dictionary definitions shows that the three terms are used to describe more or less the same phenomenon and in most cases are perceived as having synonymous meaning. In scientific literature, however, various terms are applied in the context of different social theories. Zavestoski (9) focuses on personal and intellectual development in the transformative process towards a more fulfilling and non-materialistic way of life. Etzioni (cited by Hamilton and Mail) speaks of three different groups among the followers of this movement (downshiffters, strong simplifiers and those belonging to the simple living movement), the difference being predetermined by the degree of lifestyle change as well as the pertaining of certain principles (10).

The term *voluntary simplicity* was used officially for the first time by Richard Gregg in 1936 and in 1977 Elgin and Mitchell define it as „living in a way that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich”. They argue that among the most important features of this movement are social responsibility, material simplicity, ecological awareness and personal growth. (11)

According to A. Gopaldas (12) voluntary simplicity is a relatively invisible form of consumer resistance which „unlike other consumer resistance behaviors that target an element of the production, marketing, or consumption process (e.g. brand boycotts) is a rejection of consumerism *en masse*”. He draws the distinction between the two terms “voluntary simplicity” and “simple living” employing the first to describe the kind of lifestyle and the latter to refer to the popular market-mediated ideology.

In a similar pattern Alexander (13) argues that western societies have already reached a stage in which the very process of accumulating wealth is likely trigger the same problems people are tarrying to evade by means of getting rich. In the same line of thought he defines voluntary simplicity as an oppositional living strategy that rejects the high-consumption, materialistic lifestyles of consumer cultures and affirms what is often called ‘the simple life’ or ‘downshifting.’ Generally, it also means accepting a lower income and a lower level of consumption, in exchange for more time and freedom to pursue other life goals, such as community or social engagements, more time with family, artistic or intellectual projects, more fulfilling employment, etc. Alexander believes that this particular lifestyle is not equal to poor or primitive existence, does not necessarily involve agricultural production and is often mistakenly associated with the hippies. Like Elgin and Mitchell, Alexander agrees that this is a conscious decision which implies personal, social as well as humanitarian and/or ecological aspects and is, in its very nature, an anti-consumerism movement. Such ideology embraces the idea of living a life without luxury goods and expensive possessions, without brand-new cars and designer clothes, a life in search of a simpler and better existence devoid of excessive stress. In other words, „the voluntary simplicity movement” is to be seen as a „quietly emerging social movement which represents the most coherent manifestation (in contemporary Western culture, at least) of the Thoreauvian ideals of sufficiency and simplicity” (14). Several years earlier Craig-Lees and Hill (15) published a research outlining the differences between voluntary simplifiers in relation to nonvoluntary simplifiers. At the same time Hamilton and Mail (10) argue that though „downshiffters may be pursuing a more balanced and fulfilled life [and] they may want to spend more time with their families.....motivated by a desire to live a less materialistic and more sustainable life, ... they do not see themselves as part of a movement but simply as individuals who want to make a change to the balance of their lives.” The authors state that since „the pursuit of ever-higher incomes is having a serious effect on the personal lives of many workers, including the stresses associated with debt and overwork” more than 23 % of the

Australians in the last decade, aged between 30 and 59, have downshifted. The research of Hamilton and Mail remains one of those in-depth studies which on the basis of interviews, surveys and case studies determines some general tendencies and unravels some myths about the downshifting phenomenon.

In the framework of the current study and because of the obvious likelihood in the above definitions we are going to use the terms “downshifting”, “simple living” and “voluntary simplicity” interchangeably. Our aim is to outline some general social and economic characteristics of foreign downshifters in southeastern Bulgaria.

The above goal is to be accomplished through the following tasks:

- Defining the focus group of the study.
- Determining basic social and economic characteristics for immigration to Bulgaria.
- Analyzing common perceptions and attitudes of foreign downshifters towards the socio-economic reality in the country.
- Comparing downshifters to the rest of the foreign settlers in the southeast region of the country.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The object of research in the current study is the foreigners that have settled in southeast Bulgaria. During the field work from 2009 to 2011 one hundred and six questionnaire forms were completed and analyzed along with the interviews with the respective number of respondents. We herein take it for granted that for the purpose of this research and in accordance with the Law for Foreign Citizens in the Republic of Bulgaria, Article 23, Paragraph 1 (16), the respondents have to meet the following criteria: 1) to be foreign citizens who reside in the country for reasons other than tourism and whose stay is either short-term (up to 90 days after the date of entering the country), with limited duration (up to one year), long-term (for initial period of 5 years and possible extension) or permanent (with unlimited duration). In addition, they must be 2) English-speaking foreign citizens and 3) ones that have bought a property and reside in southeastern Bulgaria.

Furthermore, when defining the group of downshifters we assume that this group of

immigrants is different from the rest of the foreigners and should include those who 1) have acquired a property in the country; 2) live here permanently; 3) are not retired; 4) do not use the property they have for vocational purposes alone and 5) have their own business.

The methods used in the research involve a theoretical analysis, a questionnaire, interviews, a comparative study and synthesis. The questionnaire comprises 15 questions 5 of which of socio-demographic nature, 7 with multiple choice answers and 3 with a possibility for more than one answer. The latter group includes questions on the reasons for immigration to Bulgaria and the things that foreigners like and dislike about living in the country.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

20 out of a 106 foreign settlers meet the above requirements to be referred to as downshifters. 90 % of them are British and have learned about Bulgaria from Internet and other information sources. Contrary to our expectations less than half of them (40 %) have visited Bulgaria prior to their decision to immigrate. In addition, the foreign downshifters in Bulgaria turn to be not only young and middle-aged adults but also elderly people who have not yet retired. These new settlers have made a decision to change their life completely by means of immigrating to a foreign and relatively unknown country and not simply by moving house from an urban to a more rural area. Most of the 20 foreign downshifters in Bulgaria are college or university graduates, have had various professions and their average age is 52. The finding coincides with Hamilton and Mail's concept of downshifters coming from various walks of life which may involve different social and economic status – rich, middle-class and low-income representatives. (10)

A great number of downshifters (65 %) have moved to Bulgaria with their families. 90 % feel positive about the change and like it living here. 80 % claim that they are making future plans to stay and live in Bulgaria permanently. For both the larger group of foreigners and for the downshifters the most important reasons for immigration are the socio-economic factor and Bulgaria's natural beauty (**Figure 1**). For foreign settlers they represent 39 % and 26 % of the answers respectively. Similarly, for the

downshifter the most often quoted reason for moving to Bulgaria is the social and economic situation in their home country. 80 % of the respondents indicate this to be their main motivational drive whereas 35 % are prone to view nature as another leading factor that has contributed to their final decision and the choice of destination. For the latter group social and economic conditions seem to be twice as important as for the rest of the migrants which is in relevance with the basic characteristics of the simple living movement.

In addition and probably due to their relatively long period of settlement in the country (3 to 5 years or more) 75 % of the downshifter say that communicating with the local population does not pose a serious problem and that they have already managed to learn some Bulgarian. For

the remaining 25 % the language barrier is still a problem but one that does not interfere with their perceptive skills and the ability to create their own opinion and attitude towards the country, its people and its future. 70 % of the respondents feel optimistic about the future of the country and nearly half of them (45 %) claim that they like almost everything about Bulgaria. The remaining 55 % of the answers reveal preferences towards Bulgarian nature, Bulgarian people, local culture and traditions. Most of the downshifter (75 %) would describe Bulgarians in very positive terms, which coincides with the general tendency among other foreigners in southeast Bulgaria where 82 % would use words such as “kind-hearted”, “hospitable” and “helpful” to refer to the local population.

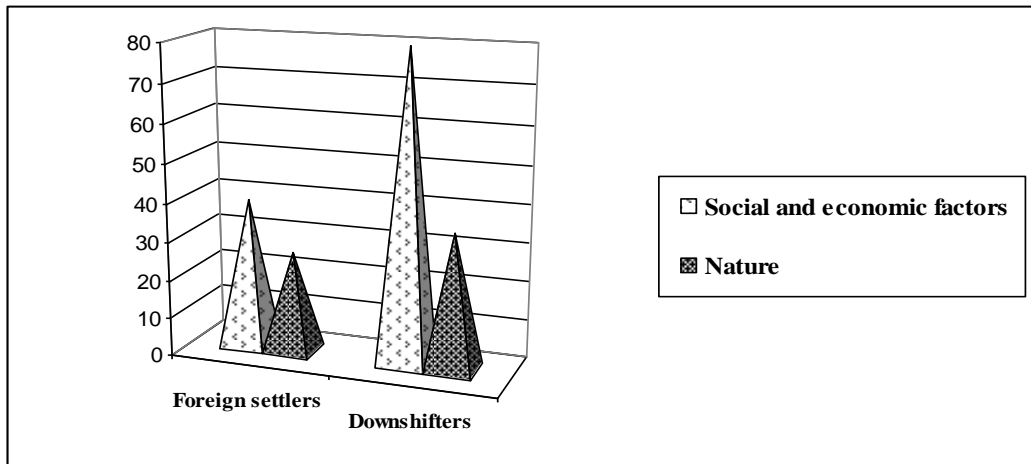


Figure 1. Most important reasons for immigration

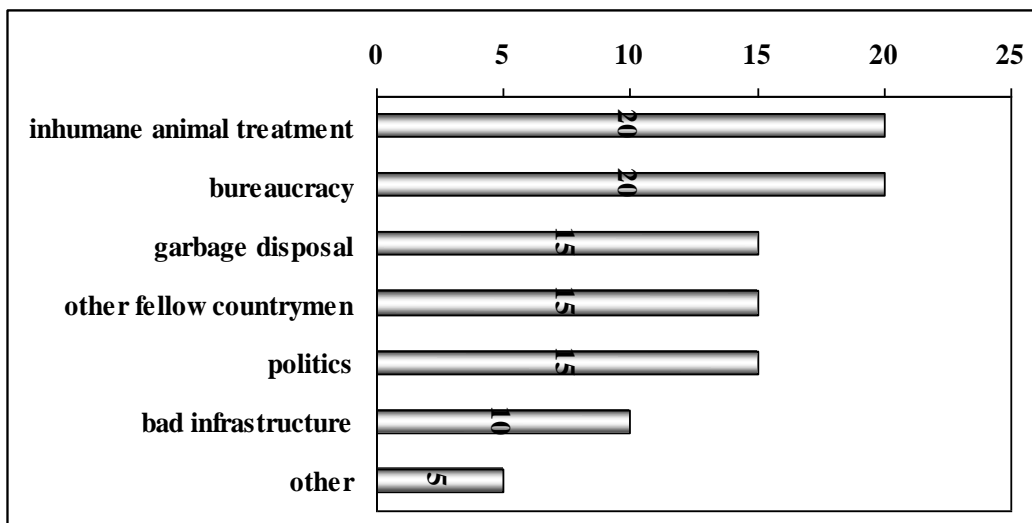


Figure 2. Dislikes about living in Bulgaria

Apart from that, when asked about the things they dislike about Bulgaria, foreign downshifters most often point to problems such as cruelty to animals (20 %) and bureaucracy (20 %), the latter being an impediment for starting a successful business. Other drawbacks include garbage disposal and pollution (15 %), politics (15 %), bad infrastructure (10 %) and

surprisingly – other Englishmen (15 %) (**Figure 2**).

**Table 1** below illustrates a comparative study of general tendencies and perceptions among foreign settlers on the one side and foreign downshifters on the other. The data used for foreign settler is acquired from the generalized results of a research in the same region published by Arnaudova (17).

**Table 1.** Comparative study of foreign settlers and downshifters

Parameters	Foreign settlers	Downshifters
<i>Attitude t/s Bulgaria</i>	> 5 years in the country - like it less	90 % positive
<i>Attitude t/s Bulgarians</i>	> 5 years in the country - more negative responses	75 % positive
<i>Attitude t/s Bg future</i>	3-5 and >5 years - more pessimistic	70 % optimistic
<i>Like best</i>	People – 30% Nature – 28% Culture & traditions – 21%	Everything – 45% Nature -18% People – 18% Culture & traditions – 17%
<i>Like least</i>	Infrastructure – 29 % Politics – 14 % Animal treatment – 7 % Bureaucracy – 7% Roma people – 7% Rubbish – 6%	Animal Treatment – 20% Bureaucracy – 20% Rubbish –15% Politics – 15 % Other English – 15% Infrastructure – 10 %
<i>Communicative problems due to language barrier</i>	Yes – 40% No -35 %	Yes – 25% No -75 %

The comparative analysis shows that there are indicative differences between the two groups. A longer period of stay in Bulgaria for more than 5 years reveals a more likely negative change in attitude towards the country, its people and its future among foreigners. Unlike them the new downshifters who have chosen Bulgaria to be their second home country are evidently more optimistic about the future (70 %) and more positive in their attitude towards Bulgaria and Bulgarian people (90 % and 75 % respectively). This positive tendency can be explained with their initial decision to settle permanently in the country and presumably their more realistic expectations and open-mindedness to the existing socio-cultural and linguistic differences. Thus, in comparison to other foreign settlers in the country, a greater percent of downshifters in southeastern Bulgaria (75 %) are prone to say that they experience few to no difficulties in

communicating with the local population due to the fact that most of them have made an effort to learn some Bulgarian.

The answers to two other questions are particularly interesting since they show the different outlooks and perceptions of these two groups of “new Bulgarians”. It is worth noticing that animal treatment (20 %) is of significant importance to foreign downshifters in Bulgaria. In the course of various meetings and interviews it became evident that almost every one of the respondents has at least one companion animal and most often these are unwanted pets that have been abused or saved from a life of starvation on the street, subsequently provided with medical care and given a second chance for a new life. During the interviews many foreigners share their concern about the proper implementation of the law regarding animal abuse and inhumane treatment and insist on the necessity for humane

education to change people's attitude to companion and domestic animals.

Bureaucracy is another concern for 20 % of the downshifters probably because many of them are trying to start a new business and are often faced with such problems. As far as politics is involved, some of them (15 %) believe that there is yet a lot to be done with respect to education, health care, as well as the sanitization and sewage system in rural areas. Bad infrastructure seems to be one of the disadvantages pointed by a relatively big percent of foreigners (29 %) and is the top one thing they dislike about Bulgaria. For the downshifters, however, this is not a priority question (10 %). Even compatriots are seen as a more significant dislike (15 %) and other serious matters are considered worthy of attention such as disposal and the throwing away of rubbish in open places alongside roads and in the outskirts of residential areas (15 %). The rising concern is indicative of a higher level of environmental awareness among those coming from abroad.

In addition, in face-to-face interactions, some of the newcomers have voiced their worries regarding Bulgaria's accession to EU and the subsequent changes and EU regulations Bulgarian society has to comply with. For some of the elderly that have chosen to live in the country Bulgaria is a reminiscent of a better past some 30-40 years ago when the impact of materialism and consumer-oriented society was far from real. It is probably because of that essence of the forgotten past that many deny the possibility of going back to their home country where, as Coates and Leahy (18) explain everything the Western society has to offer is "a system of beliefs deeply rooted in technology and science that never questions its confidence in consumer-oriented and market-driven growth and development". Thus, along with pro-environmental behaviour, the "underlying social-psychological stress and anti-consumer attitudes related to living in a consumer society" (9) do need to be taken into consideration.

In the light of the current research and the methodology involved, we are able to highlight some preliminary concepts of life-change choices and existing social perceptions and attitudes among both foreign settlers and downshifters in southeastern Bulgaria. The

approach to lifestyle changes and ideas will be also useful in expanding the research to reach a more complete and in-depth profile of immigrants in Bulgaria. What is more, as Schuetzenmeister states (19) the lifestyle concept that became prominent in social structure analysis in the 1980s will enable sociologists to take into account the fact that the environment we live in is not so much affected by opinions and attitudes but by actual practices, one of them being the downshifting movement. The various problems, experiences and viewpoints of downshifters might become the focus of attention of newly-forming specialized university centers. The above process will facilitate the work of local administration when dealing with foreign settlers whereas the latter may receive counseling on questions of interest such as normative regulations, business projects, agriculture, etc. (20)

As a result of informal conversations with many of the respondents it has become prominent that downshifters usually share that environmental concern which inspires them to live a more environmental-friendly life. 20 % of the interviewees are developing a permaship culture project, one family has a small animal production farm with goats and calves, three of the respondents have taken the initiative to develop their animal farm along with other Englishmen. Nearly everyone else has at least a small garden in their village yards for growing their own vegetables. Though none of them will define themselves as downshifters or representatives of that movement, they all express their concern about the human impact on the environment. It could be hence argued that by consciously choosing to live in a simpler and often self-sustained way downshifters accept the principles of „green consumerism”, which according to Muldoon (21) „provides a space for environmental activism for individuals who may not wish to participate in deeper ecological activities”. This type of behaviour results from a deliberate decision in which consumer behavioral choices are predetermined by a range of ethical issues and which is typical for the so called *ethical consumers* (22). It could be argued that by opting for a simple living and consciously limiting and prioritizing their needs foreign downshifters in Bulgaria move a step closer to the notion of „sustainable

consumption” - a consumption, which inherently involves a double dividend - the ability to live better by consuming less and the ability to reduce one’s impact on the environment in the very process (23).

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, among the main reasons for downshifting to Bulgaria are the social and economic factors and nature aestheticism. By leaving behind a highly industrialized, often stressful and consumer-driven Western society, the new settlers are looking to find peace and tranquility, beautiful nature, well-preserved culture and traditions and lower property prices in rural areas where they can start a new life with their families.

Downshifter’s perceptions of Bulgarian society reveal a generally stable positive tendency in their attitudes towards Bulgaria, the local population and the future of the country and most of them are planning to settle here permanently. Despite the sudden change in their life and the existing cultural and language barrier, most downshifter’s feel happy with their new life.

Their criticism towards Bulgarian society reflects the dealing with everyday problems such as animal treatment and bureaucracy issues in the administrative system which does not enable them to start their own business. Problems of pollution and political matters cause concerns too.

When compared to the larger group of foreigners in the southeastern region, downshifter’s tend to be more optimistic, have a higher level of environmental awareness and willingness to live a more sustainable and environmental-friendly life. Concern for the global environment acts as a strong motivational drive

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